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ABSTRACT

Conducting and analyzing a school culture audit can be a useful diagnostic tool and can enhance the impact of a school improvement plan. This paper describes the administration of a school culture audit and describes the use of the culture audit results to begin interaction with stakeholders relative to the school improvement process. The emphasis in this paper is on a culture audit, rather than a climate audit. Climate audits may cover a wide range of school characteristics. Culture is considered a deeper, more pervasive characteristic of a school, representing the composite of beliefs and values shared by those in the organization. The school culture profile is generated from the collection and analysis of data gathered from interviews, a survey, and unobtrusive observations at the school site. The audit begins when at least two trained facilitators meet with groups of faculty, parents, students, other staff, and administrators in groups of five to eight people. Informal observations supplement the interviews. A 13-item school culture audit is administered to teachers, teacher assistants, and school administrators. Results and differences are charted on the School Culture Profile template, a circular chart with a spoke for each item on the survey. Discussions with school personnel regarding audit findings and using the profile chart reveal opportunities for improvement and growth and show areas of strength. School culture audits and their results provide a starting point for improvement planning. (Contains 2 figures and 10 references.) (SLD)

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Improving schools through the administration and analysis of school culture audits

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Improving schools through the administration and analysis of school culture audits

As public schools continue to be the subjects of endless high-stakes assessment schemes, the schools are invoking a variety of improvement efforts as a means to correct deficiencies and promote higher levels of student achievement. As a result of these efforts, many educators and researchers alike are discovering a "missing link" in the school improvement conundrum. While many schools have completed elaborate curriculum alignment projects and have improved their instructional delivery, they often fall short of attaining the results expected. Our contention is that better results would be realized if more were done with regard to school environment issues. Several authors (Levine & LeZotte, 1995; Sizer, 1988; *Phillips, 1996; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Frieberg, 1998) agree, and refer to school climate and, more specifically, to school culture as an important, but often overlooked, component of school improvement. The results of common school reform efforts over the past two decades lend credence to the notion that unless climate and culture are addressed, meaningful improvement is an elusive goal.

The most common formula for improving schools continues to focus on three principal activities: making decisions on curriculum - what should be taught; making decisions on instructional methodology – how it should be taught; and using assessments to ascertain students' levels of competency. Assessment results are analyzed in great detail and typically serve as the blueprint for future improvement plans.

For example, if students at a school score poorly on a writing assessment, the school might develop extensive plans to correct this writing deficiency. They might summon writing specialists, provide teachers with special professional development diets

of writing inservice sessions, reapportion the school day so as to provide more time for writing instruction, and dedicate more time and attention to issues dealing with curriculum scope and sequence and teaching modalities. As encompassing as these measures are, they often yield little change in student achievement in the next round of student assessment. Certainly, curriculum inventories, pedagogical practices, and student assessments are important elements for school improvement. Conducting and analyzing a school culture audit can serve as an additional diagnostic tool, and can further enhance the impact of a school improvement plan.

It is important to note that although various kinds of audits are being conducted in the schools of America, the subject of this paper is a culture, rather than climate audit. Climate audits, according to Freiberg (1998), include a wide a range of school characteristics such as teacher interaction, feelings of safety, characteristics of school buildings, feelings about support staff, and many other things. Just as adjustments can be made in curriculum and teaching strategies, adjustments can also be made to these characteristics to produce improvement in the environment. Sometimes, says Frieberg, great improvements can result from relatively small changes in school climate. Freiberg gives some examples of ways climate audits have been used to survey students and staff to discover what problems and concerns were present, and then, how the information gained was used to improve the school environment.

Culture is generally considered a deeper, more pervasive characteristic of a school. Karpicke & Murphy (1996) say that climate includes things like respect, happiness, getting along, orderliness, whereas culture is the composite of the values and beliefs shared by those in the organization. The people in the organization have to agree

about how to do things and what is worth doing. Culture influences everything that happens in school. School culture is defined as "the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors which characterize the climate of our school" (Phillips, 1993, p. 1). Peterson and Deal (1998) define school culture as " the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time" (p. 28). Their description of undesirable cultures includes negative values, a sense of hopelessness, and fragmentation, where adults are served more than students are. The people in these cultures are critical of the ideas of others and reluctant to plan improvements or try new ideas. Peterson and Deal describe the positive culture as one where people have the same sense of purpose, where everyone wants collegiality and improvement, and people are willing to work for it. Positive culture includes traditions and rituals to call attention to, and reward commitment and accomplishments. People tell stories about good people and good things that happen in their schools. People are happy to be there. Positive cultures are engaged in problem solving, dialogue, and community building (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Lambert says (in Korpicke & Murphy, 1996) that in healthy cultures, the purposes and goals of the organization are understood and the purpose of work is to move the organization toward the realization of the vision.

According to Peterson and Deal (1998), school leaders are the "Models, potters, poets, actors, and healers. They are historians and anthropologists . . . visionaries and dreamers" (p. 29). In the strongest schools, they say, leadership comes from many sources. Leaders have to read the culture (past and present), discover which values are positive and which are negative, and find ways to increase the positive influences and decrease the negative ones. Culture has to be changed when it inhibits excellence,

according to Karpicke and Murphy (1996). They think school culture should be evaluated in relation to student outcomes. They recommend that principals and other school leaders listen to others, respond to what they hear, and ask good questions to get the feedback they need. Norris (in Karpicke and Murphy, 1996) says that changing the culture requires "understanding patience, human relations skills, and the ability to communicate" (p. 29). Karpicke and Murphy (1996) also mention three guiding principals from the Comer program as 1) no fault problem solving, 2) consensus decision making, and 3) collaboration among all stakeholders.

The principal and the principal's vision of the school are essential ingredients for positive school culture (Tice, 1996; Pawlas, 1997; & Ediger, 1997). These authors discuss the influence of the principal on school culture and how important a positive school culture is before the vision for the future can be realized. Pawlas gives examples of words associated with positive culture such as words like humor, storytelling, networks, ceremonies, and collegiality, and words associated with negative culture such as needs assessment, objectives, and evaluation.

Phillips (1993) says three components of school culture are how people behave toward each other, whether or not people feel appreciated and included, and whether there are rituals involving collaboration among people. The purpose of this presentation is to describe the administration of a school culture audit to find out about these components, and to describe the use of the culture audit results to begin interaction with stakeholders relative to the school improvement process.

The product of a school culture audit is a school culture profile. The school culture profile reveals key information relative to the collegiality and efficacy of the

stakeholders and participants within the organization. It is used as a diagnostic tool and can be incorporated in the development of a school improvement plan. Analyzing the two variables of collegiality and efficacy provides insight into the culture of the school. Questions relative to professional collaboration and, generally, how people treat each other in the workplace assist in assessing collegiality. We have observed, for example, that when teachers seem cold, cliquish, or constantly complaining and whining, students tend to reflect these modeled behaviors. When teachers are observed engaging each other in friendly conversation, are seen smiling, joking and inclusive in their relationships with others, students also tend to reflect these modeled behaviors. Questions about efficacy tend to focus on the stakeholders' views of themselves and whether or not the school values their ideas. Do people feel as if they are in control of their destinies, or do they view themselves as helpless victims? Our observations have resulted in the revelation that when teachers and other stakeholders feel disenfranchised, their ownership of school problems and the solutions to these problems is seriously lacking.

The school culture profile is generated from the collection and analysis of data gathered using three disparate techniques: interviews, a survey, and unobtrusive observations on the school site. Each technique provides a view of the situation from a different vantage point, and through the process of triangulation, the three are put together to obtain a clear and more accurate composite of the situation.

Interview

The audit begins when (at least) two trained facilitators meet with groups of randomly selected faculty members of a given school. Parents, students, classified staff and administrators are also interviewed. These groups of 5 – 8 people are asked a series

of questions relating to the culture of their school. Facilitators are trained to note dominant emotions from key participants in the group. These data will begin to yield the emotional position or status for each group. The interview contains a series of initial questions with several follow-up "prompts." A typical beginning question in the interview may be: "When you awoke this morning and thought about another day in this school (as a student, teacher, custodian, etc.), what was the dominant feeling or emotion you experienced?" Not all participants are expected to answer each question. A follow-up prompt question may be: "What are some of the sources or determinants of this emotion?" Examples of other follow-up prompts include: "Think of the previous week in terms of emotional peaks and valleys. Please identify some peaks of bliss. Identify some valleys of despair." Or, "Imagine a peak of emotional bliss next week as a teacher (student, administrator, secretary, etc.). How would you set it up for yourself? Who could you get to help?" As facilitators of the interview, it is important to identify the dominant emotions, profile sources of dominant emotions and find possible hints for improvement from the "imagined bliss" question.

Another interview question attempts to identify levels of improvement or aspirations for improvement in people. Question: "As a teacher (student, administrator, etc.), recall one way you have improved in the past year? What is something you are doing differently or better?" Information gained from this question reveals: What is important here. In which ways do people improve? Do these areas reflect the formal curriculum or staff development goals? Do improvement areas reflect the silent curriculum and unstated or spin-off outcomes? Follow-up prompt questions include: "What were the major forces or who were the people contributing to your improvement?

"What is one way you would like to improve in 12 months? How could you make this happen? Who could assist you? The facilitator notes responses, which indicate that people are learning from each other. Is this a learning community or is learning isolated and only self-directed? The facilitator should be prepared to make recommendations for strengthening forces that assist in improvement and re-directing forces that are inhibiting improvement. Also, are there some untapped forces the facilitator could identify that could be mobilized in this culture?

There are eight questions with corresponding follow-up prompts in the school culture audit interview. Interviews can usually be completed in an hour and it is not necessary to interview everyone in the school.

Unobtrusive measures

Informal observations including discussions with students, faculty and other stakeholders are the source of important information about the school and the people who work there. Common targets for these discussions are support or classified staff members. Does it appear that teachers and students treat the custodian, school secretary, teacher aide, or food service workers with respect and dignity? If not, we may assume there are sharp divisions among positions and levels of status in the school.

As two facilitators entered a North Carolina middle school, they were met at the door by three seventh grade students. "What are you doing here?" asked one. "We are looking for the best middle school in North Carolina." responded one of the researchers. "You have found it!" exclaimed one of the seventh graders as the others agreed. This encounter provided insight about the pride these students had in their school. For the skilled facilitator, the "pride" statement begs more questions. Why do you think the

school is so special? Was the school always the best? Who is most influential in making this an outstanding school? It is important to speak with a good cross section of students and staff. Facilitators separate and circulate throughout the school for best results.

The goal of data gathering during the observation phase of the audit is to search for thirteen specific characteristics and determine to what degree each characteristic is present in the school. The 13 characteristics include:

1. Collegiality – the way adults treat each other; i.e., respect and harmony vs. disrespect and discord.
2. Efficacy – feeling of ownership or capacity to influence decisions; i.e., do people tend to live with or solve problems?
3. High expectations – of self and others – excellence is acknowledged; improvement is celebrated, supported, and shared.
4. Experimentation and entrepreneurship – new ideas abound and invention occurs.
5. Trust and confidence – participants believe in the leaders and each other based on the matching of creeds and deeds.
6. Tangible support – efforts at improvement are substantive with abundant resources made available by all.
7. Appreciation and recognition of improvement – people feel special and act special.
8. Humor – caring is expressed through "kidding" or joking in tasteful ways.
9. Shared decision-making by all participants - "Anyone affected by a decision is involved in making and implementing the decision."

10. Protect what is important – participants keep the vision and avoid trivial tasks.
11. Traditions – celebrations; identify the rituals that are important to the school "community."
12. Open and honest communication – information flows throughout the organization in formal and informal channels. Everyone is on a "need to know" basis.
13. Metaphors and stories – evidence of behavior being communicated and influenced by internal imagery.

The facilitators complete Unobtrusive Measures forms (see Appendix) as they circulate throughout the school. Each item is assessed and, where possible, rated as positive or negative. Shaping and interpretation of the facilitators' notes occurs in a debriefing session after the observations have been completed. These data are included in the final profile report.

Survey

A thirteen item school culture audit is administered to the teachers, teacher assistants and school administrators (see Appendix for the questions on the survey). Respondents are asked to make two judgments for each item: to what degree is the item present in the school, and how important is the item. Responses are tabulated and two indices are computed: the ratio of presence to importance, and the difference between the presence and importance. Ratios and differences are charted on the School Culture Profile Template, a circular chart with thirteen spokes, one for each item on the survey. Subsequent meetings are in each school and audit results are presented in graphic form. Discussions are conducted relative to the significance of, and possible solutions for, the most substantive gaps between items perceived "present" and "important."

School Culture Profile
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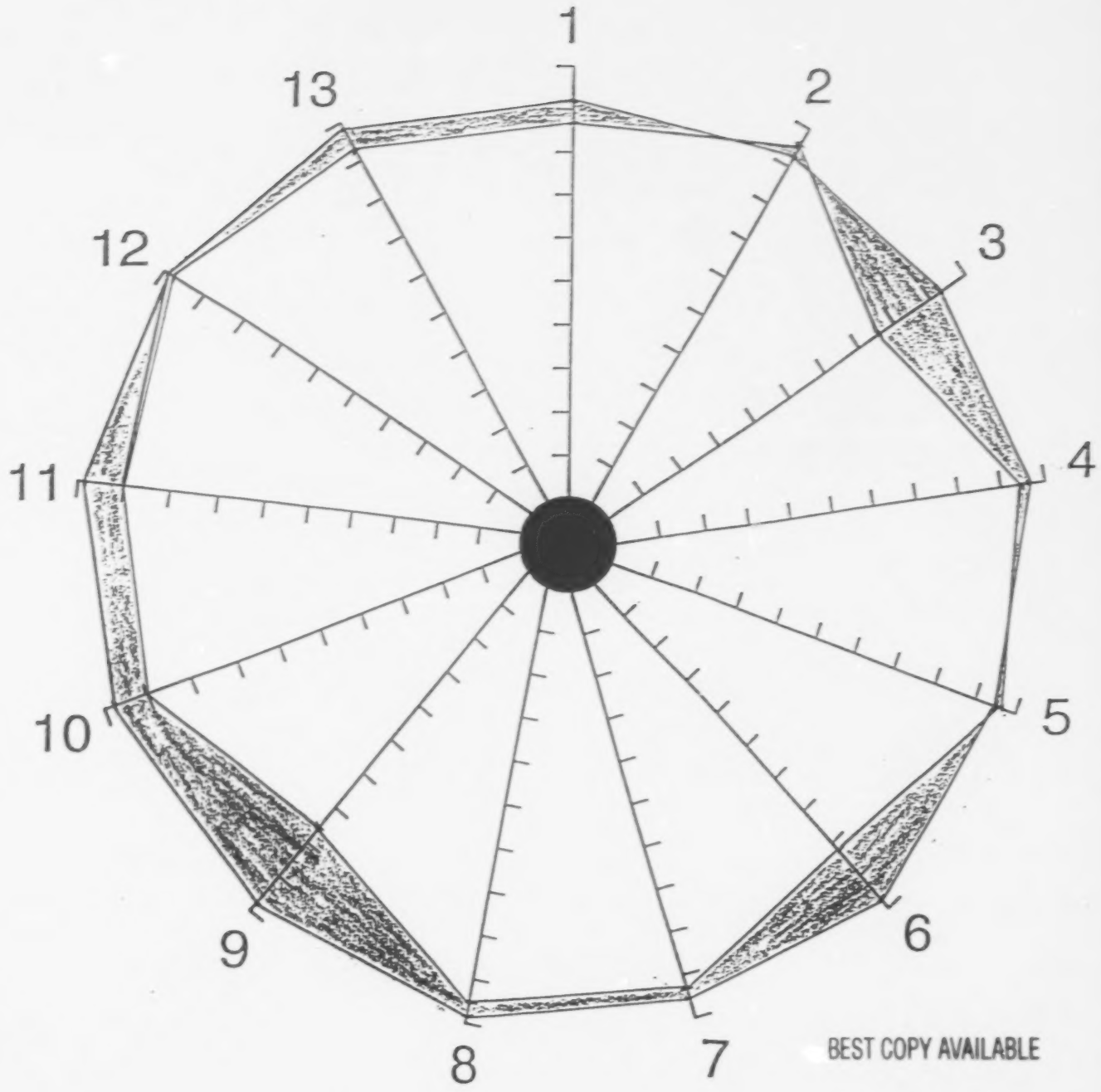

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Figure 1. School Culture Profile

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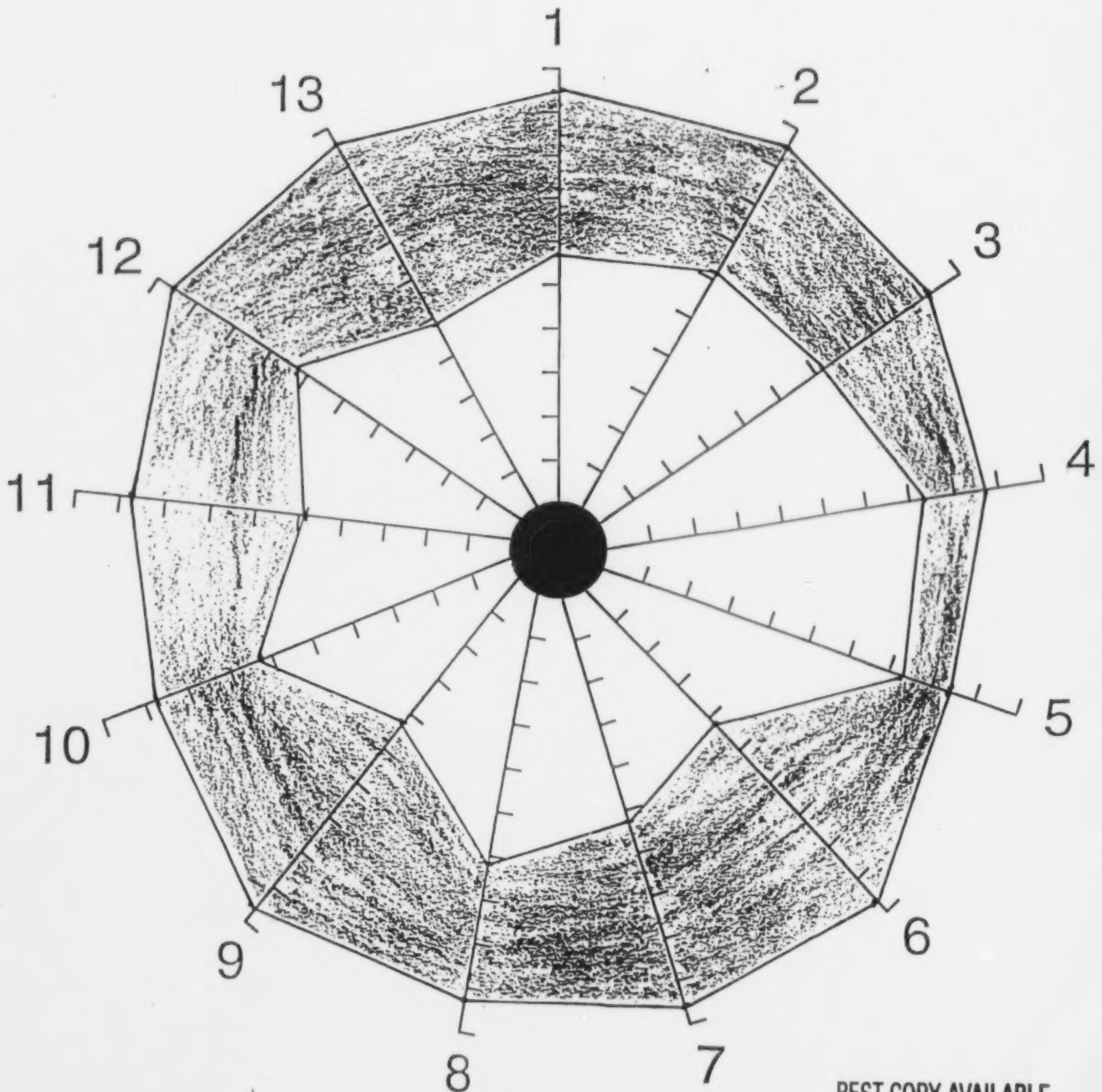

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Figure 2. School Culture Profile

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Figure 1 is an example of a profile of a school with some relatively large gaps between "present" and "important." Figure 2 illustrates a school with a more positive school culture. Ratios of presence to importance can also be charted on a profile template.

Discussions with school personnel regarding ratios reveal opportunities for improvement and growth. The charts are also helpful in graphically depicting areas of strength. With transparency overlays, the charts can be used to compare the results of schools and the district composite score. School culture audits and their results provide a starting point for school personnel to discuss and plan school improvement measures.

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